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ABSTRACT

In light of the fact that the number of people in their later years is increasing faster than any other age group, each generation must confront its aging and ask, collectively and individually, why, how, and when. The liberal arts curriculum should include a course examining the omnipresent process of aging and its relationship to communication. Gerontology and observation of and interaction with people of older generations can all provide valuable knowledge and sources to include in a course on aging and communication. Courses in sociology, psychology, anthropology, interpersonal communication, mass media, and group interaction and discussion may all serve as useful prerequisites for the student of communication and aging. Important topics to be covered in a communication and aging course include: (1) development throughout the life cycle; (2) the aging process and communicative interaction (intrapersonal and interpersonal); (3) communication across and between age levels; (4) mass media and the aging; and (5) communication specialists in aging-related organizations and settings. Also, an important supplement for the course is experiential activities that will help integrate theory with practical knowledge and experience, such as intergenerational outreach projects. (Seven references are appended.) (MS)

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Liberal Arts and the Communication and Aging Course: Infusing a Tradition With An 'Old/New' Twist'

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"Every man desires to live long, but no man would be old." This epigram of Johnathan Swift's seems to hold as much validity for the present time as it did when he first constructed it well over 200 years ago. Yet, with each generation we continue to age and grow older and in the decades since the turn of the century, we have grown older in ever increasing numbers. In fact, the number of people in their later years is increasing faster than any other age group.

Each generation at some point, must confront its aging and asks collectively and on individual bases why, how, when? For, as another satirist, Sebastian R.N. Chanfort of France observed in the 1700's "Man arrives at every stage of life a novice."

Over time, questions relating to aging have also been examined and confronted implicitly and explicitly by students and scholars of various disciplines. Well before the establishment of the medieval trivium and quadrivium of the liberal arts scholars and teachers struggled with attempting to understand the aging process and how it could be integrated with such existential questions as "who am I?" and "what will I be?"

In some cases these early scholars may have even sown some of the seeds of ageism, prejudice against the elderly. For example, Aristotle, in his Rhetoric may have conceived some of the stereotypes of aging that are still extant today when he described elderly men as cynical, distrustful, small-minded, not generous, cowardly, fearful, too fond of themselves, shameless, slaves to the love of gain, querulous.

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Other stereotypes and fears were perpetrated by Juvenal the Roman poet and satirist in his Satires, XI when he wrote "Old age is more to be feared than death." Based on examination of the portrayal of the elderly by some of our present day advertising media as one example, Juvenal's observation continues to be accepted and age, feared.

How might these fears be disspelled, the stereotypes broken? In what way can succeeding generations be encouraged to look at aging as a natural process, not a disease to be avoided or prevented at all costs?

Perhaps we hold some of the keys. Given the premise that we who come from the liberal arts tradition, the original trivium, espouse its value in assisting our students in their quest to answer some of the existential questions it seems incumbent upon us to include a course examining the omnipresent process of aging and its relationship to communication as part of our liberal arts curriculum. What better place to integrate such study than in the province of the liberal arts; trivium's"rhetoric". For, as our colleague, Carl Carmicheal pointed out more than a decade ago "...Many of the problems of the aged are directly related to communication."(Carmichael, 1976).

Obviously the one who proposes integration of such a course must have a sincere interest in the topic and must carefully examine his or her own views on aging. Personally exorcising some of the ageist views one may hold can be done by formally and informally studying some of the vast quantities of information about aging which are being gathered by many disciplines under the rubric of gerontology. Additionally, observation of and interaction with people of older generations can provide valuable knowledge and sources to include in a course on aging and communication.

Persuading colleagues, departmentally and college-wide that there is a need for such a course and convincing them that it can be integrated into the traditional liberal arts curriculum is essential for the success of such

integration. By preparing a logical argument based on personal research and substantiated by the impressive statistics and facts which demonstrate the significant growth of numbers of elderly in our society and by highlighting their communicative needs, colleagues can be persuaded about the importance of such a course.

By investigating the types of courses offered by other departments within your college or university which deal with aging the focus of the specific communication and aging course can be narrowed. Additionally, it may be decided that some of these courses in other departments might be required as prerequisites for the student who desires to enroll in the communication and aging course.

Requiring the communication and aging student to have had at least one course in psychology, sociology or anthropology that considered the concept of life-span development provides a positive framework for the consideration of aging as it relates to communication. Within our largely four year liberal arts college for example, there are several courses in other departments which deal with aging. One which I have required as a prerequisite is in the psychology department, Life Span Development. Other courses within the psychology and sociology departments that may be useful cognates are a course entitled Aging and another Sociology of Aging.

There are courses provided in different departments which might also be helpful to the student of communication and aging although they may not be required as prerequisites or cognates. In our health and physical education department for example, a course entitled Nutrition, Exercise and Aging is offered.

An examination of the existing courses within your own department's curriculum also provides a reference point in determining which courses should or could serve as prerequisites to the course in communication and aging. From my experience, a course in interpersonal communication is an essential prerequisite.

It assists the student in exploring both interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects which can be applied to the topic of aging.

It may not be necessary to make an introductory mass media course a prerequisite but if students who enroll in the communication and aging course have had such a course it may be useful. A mass media course might provide an understanding of practices and policies that can be explored and applied to the ways in which elderly contribute to decisions made by media managers and how the elderly are portrayed by the media.

Another useful course for students of communication and aging may be one in group interaction and discussion. Here again, it may not be necessary to have such a course as a prerequisite. However, the group discussion course would prepare the student for making group decisions and finding solutions to problems and issues that may eventually confront them in dealing with the process of aging. For, many policies affecting the elderly are initially examined and proposed by groups of people such as family, government and voluntary, non-profit groups.

Suggestions for the actual development of the communication and aging course and how it might be presented can be obtained by reviewing the literature pertaining to such courses which has been published in many of our journals. Several examples include the following:

Freimuth, V.S. and K. Jamieson. Communicating With the Elderly: Shattering Stereotypes. (1979). National Institute of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. Falls Church, Virginia: Speech Communication Association.

Hawkins, R. "Strategies and Materials for a College Course in Communication and Aging." Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association. Anaheim, California Nov. 12-15, 1981

Webb, L. "Developing a Unit or Course on Communication and Aging." The Florida Speech Communication Journal, 14.1 (1986):2-10.

By reviewing these and other sources it can be determined which types of

topics should be covered in a communication and aging course. Topics such as the following appear to be agreed upon for inclusion by those of us who have taught such a course:

I. Development throughout the life cycle

II. The aging process and communicative interaction
    A. Intrapersonal
    B. Interpersonal

III. Communication across and between age levels

IV. Mass media and the aging

V. Communication specialists in aging-related organizations and settings.

An important supplement to the consideration of these topics in my view is providing meaningful experiential activities for the students of communication and aging. This seems to integrate theory with practical knowledge and experience. By contacting agencies and professional individuals who work with the elderly assistance and support in setting up situations in which students will have opportunities to interact with the elderly can be arranged. These activities can be categorized as intergenerational outreach projects as proposed in part by R. Hawkins (Hawkins, 1981).

Student readiness for a course in communication and aging is another consideration in attempting to integrate it into a traditional liberal arts curriculum. For undergraduate students upper division status would likely provide the most effective level of readiness. Also, by encouraging non-traditional, adult learners to enroll in the course with the more traditional college age students there are increased opportunities to gain information and insights from individuals who have had more time to experience and learn from the aging process.

Thus, with these suggestions, descriptions and explanations you may now believe a communication and aging course can be successfully integrated into a liberal arts curriculum. Sharing knowledge of aging and communication with our

students in a formal course may enhance the lives of all of us. For as Aristotle once contended "The person who knows only his own generation remains forever a child."

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